THE EARLY ELIZABETHAN POLITY

William Cecil and the British Succession Crisis, 1558–1569

STEPHEN ALFORD

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK
40 West 20th Street, New York NY 10011–4211, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa

http://www.cambridge.org

First published 1998
First paperback edition 2002

Typeface Sabon 10/12 pt.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 0 521 62218 2 hardback
ISBN 0 521 89285 6 paperback

CONTENTS

Introduction

> The Quene of Scottes in dede is and shall allweise be a daungerooss person to your estate, yet there be degrees wherby the daunger may be more or less. If your M[ajesty] wold marry it shuld be less, and whylest yow doo not, it will incress. If hir person be restrayned ether here or at home in hir own C[ontrey] it will be less. If it be at liberty it will be gretar.[1]

I

Sir William Cecil, Principal Secretary to Elizabeth I, drafted this advice to the Queen on 6 October 1569, just a few weeks after she had found out about the secret marriage arrangements between Mary Stuart, Queen of Scots, and England's most senior peer, Thomas Howard, duke of Norfolk. Mary had been in protective custody in England since May 1568, and the Elizabethan regime was in the process of trying her for the murder of her second husband Henry, Lord Darnley, in 1567. The death of Darnley and opposition to Mary's government had led to the Queen of Scots' effective abdication – more in the style of Shakespeare's Richard II than a voluntary surrender of power in Scotland – followed by a spell of imprisonment between 1567 and 1568. But Mary and her cause represented more than a tricky legal problem for English and Scottish commissioners. The Queen of Scots was – or at least was perceived to be – a profound threat to the Elizabethan polity: a living connection between the ideological challenge of militant European Catholicism, the threat of Catholic subversion in England, Mary's claim to Elizabeth's crown, and Elizabeth's refusal to marry or to settle England's succession. How this sense of danger developed – and the part Cecil played in explaining and articulating it – is a major theme of this book.

But so too is the impact of this British crisis, in its European context, on the early Elizabethan polity. The politics of British emergency had serious

[1] Cotton Caligula C. 1, fo. 456r.

consequences for the regime – for the relationship between Elizabeth, her Privy Council, and her parliament; for the political culture and conciliar politics of the 1560s; and for the nature of 'ministerial service' in the middle of the sixteenth century. Perhaps the best way to explain the connection between the British impact of Mary Stuart and the domestic politics of Elizabethan England rests on the sort of counterfactual questions academic historians generally shy away from. What if Mary had been prepared to reign in Scotland in peaceful co-existence with her cousin? What if political circumstance had not allowed men like Cecil to develop a conspiratorial model of England's (and Britain's) political relationship with the Catholic powers of Europe? If Cateau-Cambrésis had not robbed England of its last Continental possession? If the Queen of Scots had been happy to ratify the Treaty of Edinburgh after 1560? Or – and perhaps the most significant – if Elizabeth had been willing to take the advice of her councillors and marry or, at least, settle the succession of the kingdom? Then, perhaps, men like William Cecil would not have had to cajole, press, and petition their Queen in the Council chamber and in parliament or – more radically – make provisions for the 'republican' and conciliar alternative they presented in 1563.

Patrick Collinson has called this reaction to political crisis – the 'readiness of the political nation', including William Cecil, 'to contemplate its own immediate political future' temporarily without the monarchy – a form of 'monarchical republicanism'.[2] He noticed two 'convulsive episodes' in Elizabethan political history: the parliament of 1572, with its call for a solution to the problem of Mary Stuart; and a parliamentary bill in 1584, which introduced a plan for a conciliar interregnum in the event of Elizabeth's sudden or violent death. For Professor Collinson, this was the 'Elizabethan exclusion crisis', in which England declared itself 'a republic which happened also to be a monarchy: or vice versa'.[3] In other words, political crisis forced Elizabethans to reconsider their relationship with their Queen: 'when it came to the crunch, the realm took precedence over the ruler. So citizens were concealed within subjects.'[4] Indeed, by 1583 Cecil could refer in print to the Queen 'and all her governours and magistrates of Justice', not just to councillors and servants.[5] Professor John

[2] Patrick Collinson, 'The monarchical republic of Queen Elizabeth I', in his *Elizabethan essays* (London and Rio Grande, 1994), p. 43.

[3] For the quotation, Collinson, 'Monarchical republic', p. 43; Patrick Collinson, 'The Elizabethan exclusion crisis and the Elizabethan polity', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 84 (1995), 51–92.

[4] Patrick Collinson, '*De republica Anglorum*: or, history with the politics put back', in his *Elizabethan essays*, p. 19.

[5] William Cecil, *The execution of justice in England for maintenaunce of publique and Christian peace . . .* (*STC* 4902; London, 1583), sig. B1r.

Guy has argued that the political cultures of the periods 1558–85 and 1585–1603 were strikingly different, to such an extent that there were 'two reigns'. The distinction rests on the three elements of the early Privy Council's 'political creed': first, that England was a 'mixed polity'; second, that the 'prerogative of the ruler' was limited by the advice of the Council; and third, that 'the assent of the whole realm' in parliament was needed 'to effect significant political or religious change and in particular to resolve the issue of the succession to the throne'. The 'second reign' was different: the work of the Council was less collegial and less committed to conciliar policy-making. The 'watershed' was the execution of Mary, Queen of Scots – a dangerous woman but an important focus for collective effort.[6]

In recent years, other historians of the late medieval and Tudor periods have been willing to challenge old orthodoxies – court and Council faction and 'constitutional' parliamentary opposition to the 'government', for example – and more prepared to connect language to the political process and discuss serious subjects like counsel.[7] Institutional and administrative history is now less influential in Tudor studies than it was in the 1960s and the 1970s. Tudor specialists at the end of this century are perhaps more willing to accept the judgement of a historian of Henry VI: that the 'main business of political systems is to attend to the present need', and that political consensus 'usually rests on a series of less formal arrangements which have their own patterns and principles; patterns and principles which are all the more influential because they are shared and often unstated'.[8] Many of the most important sources in this study are personal

[6] John Guy, 'The 1590s: the second reign of Elizabeth I?', in John Guy (ed.), *The reign of Elizabeth I. Court and culture in the last decade* (Cambridge, 1995), pp. 13–14.

[7] Apart from Collinson, '*De republica Anglorum*', 'Exclusion crisis', and 'Monarchical republic', and Guy, 'The 1590s', see Simon Adams, 'Eliza enthroned? The court and its politics', in Christopher Haigh (ed.), *The reign of Elizabeth I* (London, 1984), pp. 55–77; Adams, 'Faction, clientage and party. English politics, 1550–1603', *History Today*, 32 (1982), 33–9; Adams, 'Favourites and factions at the Elizabethan court', in Ronald G. Asch and Adolf M. Birke (eds.), *Princes, patronage, and the nobility. The court at the beginning of the modern age c. 1450–1650* (Oxford, 1991), pp. 265–87; Terence Ball, James Farr, and Russell L. Hanson (eds.), *Political innovation and conceptual change* (Cambridge, 1989); Paul A. Fideler and T.F. Mayer (eds.), *Political thought and the Tudor commonwealth* (London, 1992); Dale Hoak (ed.), *Tudor political culture* (Cambridge, 1995); Lisa Jardine and Anthony Grafton, '"Studied for action": how Gabriel Harvey read his Livy', *Past and Present*, no. 129 (1990), 30–78; Markku Peltonen, *Classical humanism and republicanism in English political thought 1570–1640* (Cambridge, 1995); J.G.A. Pocock (ed.), *The varieties of British political thought, 1500–1800* (Cambridge, 1993); Quentin Skinner, *Reason and rhetoric in the philosophy of Hobbes* (Cambridge, 1996); David Starkey (ed.), *The English court: from the Wars of the Roses to the Civil War* (London and New York, 1987); Maurizio Viroli, *From politics to reason of state. The acquisition and transformation of the language of politics 1250–1600* (Cambridge, 1992); for important developments in Scotland, see Roger A. Mason (ed.), *Scots and Britons. Scottish political thought and the union of 1603* (Cambridge, 1994).

[8] John Watts, *Henry VI and the politics of kingship* (Cambridge, 1996), p. 13.

and not institutional – letters, diplomatic reports to the Queen and to her councillors, informal notes, rough drafts of minutes and petitions, and private memoranda, often prepared by Cecil. Early Elizabethan political culture was a complex blend of personality, of the practical needs of governance, of councillors' perception of themselves as classical governors, of a strong providential sense of England's relationship with Catholic Europe, and of the part Elizabeth I played in her polity.

II

New interpretations of the Elizabethan polity have important implications for individual councillors like William Cecil, and the relationship between subjects and their Queen. For too long, Cecil and Elizabeth have been viewed as an inseparable political partnership, bound together by a common interest in moderation and national safety. This relationship needs to be reassessed. But if Tudor political historians accept Collinson's belief that 'the Queen and Cecil' cannot be tacked together 'as if they were the front and rear legs of a pantomime horse' – or John Guy's argument that before 1585 Cecil and Elizabeth were 'virtually different species' when it came to 'intellectual genes', and that they 'subscribed to discordant political philosophies' – the effect is profoundly liberating.[9] Because historians accepted Cecil and the Queen as an inseparable partnership, it was tempting to endorse Sir Robert Naunton's view in the 1630s that, while Cecil obediently served his mistress, other privy councillors and courtiers engaged in factional pursuits.[10] The sources present a very different picture: of a Council working efficiently, often sharing a common interpretation of political events and policies; of a Queen effectively removed from the day-to-day operation of government, instinctively cautious and sometimes paralyzed by indecision; but, above all, of a Cecil far removed from the second-rate bureaucrat characterized by Thomas Babington Macaulay in the nineteenth century and Cecil's biographer in the twentieth, Conyers Read.

Cecil's modern political reputation can almost be dated precisely from April 1832, when *The Edinburgh Review* published Macaulay's biting (and anonymous) critique of the *Memoirs of the life and administration of the Right Honourable William Cecil, Lord Burghley* by Edward Nares, Regius Professor of Modern History at Oxford. Cecil, the *Memoirs* had contended, deserved to be put into a wide chronological context, and Nares understood the relationship between Elizabeth's throne, Continental threats,

[9] Collinson, 'Monarchical republic', p. 39; Guy, 'The 1590s', p. 13.
[10] Sir Robert Naunton, *Fragmenta regalia*, ed. Edward Arber (London, 1870), p. 20.

Mary Stuart, and Cecil's political position;[11] for Macaulay, on the other hand, Cecil was an average and uninspiring trimmer – luckily, it seems, because if 'he had been a man of original genius, and of a commanding mind, it would have been scarcely possible for him to keep his power, or even his head'.[12] And although Nares had at least some support from Burghley's contemporaries, who praised Cecil's commitment to the defence of England against the Catholic menace and his active patronage of learning,[13] Macaulay won the battle. In 1898 Martin Hume described Cecil as a born conservative, 'judicious, well-nigh incorruptible, prudent, patriotic, and clear-headed'.[14] Fifteen years later – and forty-two years before his standard biography of the early Cecil – Conyers Read called him a *politique*.[15] Wallace MacCaffrey once measured Cecil against the revolutionary Thomas Cromwell, whose 'talents had lain in his abilities to reshape and to modernize the structure of English administration, and to carry through with a steady hand the managed revolution of the Henrician Reformation'. Cecil was less imaginative and less creative, more conventional and cautious, a Protestant but his 'religious feelings were not deep'.[16]

Over the past few years, Cecil's reputation (like Cromwell's revolution in government) has been refined, readjusted, and challenged. The private Cecil – socially conservative, aristocratic, and obsessed with his family background – is now far more accessible.[17] His importance as a British politician was emphasized by Dr Jane Dawson in 1989,[18] and her work has made its mark on some recent and important studies.[19] But there are still some important deficiencies. Cecil's papers are some of the best sources on

[11] [Thomas Babington Macaulay,] 'Nares' *Memoirs of Lord Burghley*', *The Edinburgh Review*, 55 (1832), 271–96; Edward Nares, *Memoirs of the life and administration of the Right Honourable William Cecil, Lord Burghley* . . ., 3 vols. (London, 1828–31), I, pp. viii–ix; II, pp. 99–100.

[12] [Macaulay,] 'Nares' *Memoirs of Lord Burghley*', 276.

[13] For example, George Whetstone, *The English myrror. A regard wherein al estates may behold the conquests of envy* . . . (*STC* 25336; London, 1586), pp. 138–9; Hugh Broughton, *A treatise of Melchisedek, proving him to be Sem* . . . (*STC* 3890; London, 1591), sig. 2v–3r.

[14] Martin Hume, *The great Lord Burghley. A study in Elizabethan statecraft* (London, 1898), p. ix.

[15] Conyers Read, 'Factions in the English Privy Council under Elizabeth', *Annual Report of the American Historical Association*, 1 (1911), 115; Read, 'Walsingham and Burghley in Queen Elizabeth's Privy Council', *English Historical Review*, 28 (1913), 37; Read, *Mr Secretary Cecil and Queen Elizabeth* (London, 1955).

[16] Wallace MacCaffrey, *The shaping of the Elizabethan regime* (London, 1969), p. 302; for a reinterpretation, see MacCaffrey, *Elizabeth I* (London, 1993), pp. 63–9.

[17] G.R. Morrison, 'The land, family, and domestic following of William Cecil, Lord Burghley *c.* 1550–1598', DPhil thesis, University of Oxford (1990), pp. 5–8.

[18] Jane E.A. Dawson, 'William Cecil and the British dimension of early Elizabethan foreign policy', *History*, 74 (1989), 196–216.

[19] Roger A. Mason, 'The Scottish reformation and the origins of Anglo-British imperialism', in Mason (ed.), *Scots and Britons*, p. 181; Marcus Merriman, 'Stewarts and Tudors in the

early Elizabethan political culture, and yet Read thought that the Principal Secretary's notes 'are often tedious'.[20] He dismissed unfinished drafts,[21] and he had no real interest in the intellectual value of Cecil's work; Read looked at the memoranda empirically, but did not read them as exercises in political thought or policy. Sir Geoffrey Elton noted over forty years ago that Thomas Cromwell thought little of Plato but was aware of the 'sentence' of Aristotle and could talk on the subject of 'pollycy'.[22] A year earlier Read had mentioned that Cecil read Latin and Greek but 'took no interest in the unfolding glories of Elizabethan literature'.[23] Nevertheless, *Mr Secretary Cecil* is still the main, comprehensive, and basically unchallenged source on Cecil the political man. For over forty years, historians have had the dull and lifeless Cecil they deserve.

Perhaps the best way to characterize old Cecil historiography is the underuse of a significant and very rich reserve of historical material, coupled with a limited sense of the Principal Secretary's intellectual and political preoccupations, and aggravated by an obsession with Elizabethan court faction. Even in the 1990s, it is still possible to measure the 'factional intrigue' of Elizabeth's noblemen against a Cecil cast as the symbol of bureaucracy, meritocracy, and service.[24] But more questions have to be asked. The debate on faction has skewed any real sense of the policy-making process in early Elizabethan England. Who made policy? Was it Elizabeth, acting with Cecil as her 'chief minister'? Or is this interpretation as redundant for the 1560s as it is for the 1520s and 1530s?[25] What part did the Privy Council play in collating, debating, and (crucially) deciding policy? How did the sixteenth-century model of counsel – the duty of councillors to offer advice, and the freedom of a monarch either to accept or to reject it – work in political practice?[26] If the role of the Privy Council was significant, what was Cecil's part in it? Bureaucrat or political fixer?

mid-sixteenth century', in Alexander Grant and Keith J. Stringer (eds.), *Uniting the kingdom? The making of British history* (London and New York, 1995), pp. 120–1.

[20] Read, *Cecil*, p. 11.

[21] For example, Conyers Read, 'William Cecil and Elizabethan public relations', in S.T. Bindoff, J. Hurstfield, and C.H. Williams (eds.), *Elizabethan government and society* (London, 1961), p. 33, on 'A necessary consideration of the perillous state of this tyme', 7 June 1569; see below, pp. 182 n.3, 194–8.

[22] G.R. Elton, 'The political creed of Thomas Cromwell', in his *Studies in Tudor and Stuart politics and government*, 4 vols. (Cambridge, 1974–92), II, pp. 216–17.

[23] Read, *Cecil*, p. 11.

[24] Wallace MacCaffrey, 'Patronage and politics under the Tudors', in Linda Levy Peck (ed.), *The mental world of the Jacobean court* (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 28–9.

[25] John Guy, 'Thomas Wolsey, Thomas Cromwell and the reform of Henrician government', in Diarmaid MacCulloch (ed.), *The reign of Henry VIII. Politics, policy and piety* (Basingstoke and London, 1995), pp. 39–43.

[26] John Guy, 'The rhetoric of counsel in early modern England', in Hoak (ed.), *Tudor political culture*, p. 294.

How did Cecil approach, synthesize, and interpret information and intelligence? What was the relationship between his work as Principal Secretary and his own political and mental world? What were his influences? Purely Protestant, or something more to reinforce the perception he had of his own place in the early Elizabethan political scheme of things?

III

William Cecil had a political creed in the 1560s. It rested on the principle that both the Privy Council and parliament had a duty to counsel, guide, and direct Elizabeth, even in matters of 'state' like the Queen's marriage, the succession to the kingdom, and England's religion. In a British context, he extended this interpretation of the polity to the work of Council and parliament in Scotland and developed a strong sense of the political and ecclesiastical relationship between England, Ireland, and Scotland. Cecil understood and accepted the culture of Tudor imperialism but – like Sir Thomas Smith in *De republica Anglorum* and unlike Elizabeth – he believed that the Queen's *imperium* was limited by the advice of her councillors in Council and in parliament.

It is sometimes too easy for the historian to take theory and impose it on historical events; in this way, arguments can become circular and self-fulfilling. In the opening chapter of this book, I have tried to explore the mental world of Cecil: his education, training, and early political career. There are some important connections between the nature of the Cecil archive and the Principal Secretary's approach to policy: for example, his memoranda written *in utramque partem*, using the skills of a rhetorical training at Cambridge in the 1530s and Gray's Inn in the 1540s, and designed to explore the political issues of the 1560s. Professor Quentin Skinner and Dr Markku Peltonen have explored Tudor rhetorical training, classical models of behaviour for gentlemen in the sixteenth century, and expressions of Elizabethan republicanism;[27] what I wanted to do was to take these insights and use them to illuminate the archives, to move one step beyond the purely empirical approach of Conyers Read. The implications of this for a study of Cecil are important. Elizabethans made a connection between intellectual (and especially classical) pursuits, historical models of action and behaviour, and active policy. Contemporaries understood the importance of the *vir civilis*, the man who leads a productive public life, able to take part in the councils (and counsels) of his prince. Roger Ascham, Cecil's old teacher at Cambridge in the 1530s and Elizabeth

[27] Skinner, *Reason and rhetoric*, pp. 19–87; Peltonen, *Classical humanism and republicanism*, pp. 2–12.

I's Latin secretary in the 1560s, began *The scholemaster* by introducing readers to Cecil at dinner, keen to talk 'most gladlie of some matter of learning'. Debate and discussion in Cecil's chamber, even with 'the meanest at his Table', were important to a man whose head was 'so full of most weightie affaires of the Realme' – surely not as a diversion but as part of the public life of an active man, Cicero's man of *negotium*.[28]

Cecil's private notes written *in utramque partem* became part of the process of Elizabethan policy-making, crucial to his role as Principal Secretary, privy councillor, and governor. An important element in the making of policy at Council level was information, intelligence, and synthesis. Cecil received reports from ambassadors and representatives, analyzed their contents, and combined the presentation of evidence with his own notes on the problem. Cecil's influence on this process was reinforced by the nature of very sensitive meetings: he often wrote and edited the minutes for the Council and perhaps presented the findings to Elizabeth. These meetings on delicate subjects often dealt with the activities of Mary Stuart, and they were a crucial element in the development of British policy.[29] And Cecil's approach was genuinely British, or perhaps more accurately conceived in terms of England, Ireland, and Scotland. He was part of a defined Anglo-Scottish Protestant community. He understood the strategic and political implications of the interference of Scottish mercenaries in Ulster and the part sympathetic Scots could play in helping to pacify Ireland. Cecil was aware of the benefits of Protestant unity and of a 'league' and 'amity' between England and Scotland, reinforced by a peaceful Ireland. He explored alternatives to Stuart rule in Scotland, and managed to blend the principles of Protestant co-operation and ecclesiastical independence with the standard English claim of superiority over the northern kingdom. The way Cecil articulated this British political creed – the impact of England's political relationship with Scotland and Ireland and the vocabulary he used to explain his concept of Britain – is a central concern of this book.

[28] Roger Ascham, *The scholemaster* (*STC* 832; London, 1570), sig. B1r.

[29] Hiram Morgan, 'British policies before the British state', in Brendan Bradshaw and John Morrill (eds.), *The British problem, c. 1534–1707. State formation in the Atlantic archipelago* (Basingstoke and London, 1996), pp. 66–88.